

THE INFLUENCE OF FRANCE UPON AMERICAN ARCHITECTURE.¹

THE consideration of the influence of French architecture upon that of America is too large a subject to be properly handled in the compass of a brief paper. From the days of the Revolution, when the support of Lafayette and his followers brought the two countries into close relations of friendship, this influence has been a factor in our architectural development—or in the changes from which until lately we may be said to have suffered. To discuss it fully would require us to consider the story of our architecture during the present century, as well as that of France. It is, nevertheless, only within the past thirty years, or thereabouts, that French influence upon American architecture has counted for much, and it is a still briefer period since it has anywhere in the country shown signs of predominance. What it at present concerns us to enquire is rather, how far the strong French influence which has lately shown itself (in some quarters amounting to an organized propaganda) is wholesome, and how far it is a source of dangers to be avoided—how far its results seem to be beneficial and how far they are to be deplored; and especially it behooves us to consider in this regard the present state of architecture in France as compared with its condition, say, for instance, twenty or thirty years ago, and the kind of influence which, at this moment, it seems to be exerting upon us.

Even when we have thus limited our enquiry we shall, in order to approach the subject intelligently, be obliged briefly to recall the main facts in the history of the influence we are to discuss.

At the beginning of the century the architecture of this country was still for the most part in the hands of simple craftsmen who were carrying on the traditions of the Colonial period. But the loss of traditional skill among the craftsmen themselves and the rival and confusing claims of Greek and Gothic revivals rapidly produced that condition of chaos and entire absence of wholesome tradition which made the advent of the educated and professionally trained architect the only way out.

American architecture suffered grievously during more than the first half of this century through the want of properly trained practitioners. There were few men able to design even respectable buildings, while the public, more and more surrounded by and accustomed to ugly buildings, and without the guidance of competent leaders of taste, lost all ability to distinguish between the good and the bad. Under these circumstances, with our shifting population and the sudden acquirement of wealth by new families, the ravages of shoddy commercialism, of vulgar and meretricious shams, were greater here than anywhere else in the world. All architects will probably readily admit that we are even yet not entirely free from this contagion, which makes showiness and novelty, not real excellence or beauty, the standard. During the early years of the century a few names stand out brightly; notably, Jefferson, Bulfinch, Thornton, and Isaiah Rogers, and for some time good traditional work continued occasionally to be done. In the main, after about 1820, the succession of architectural fashions showed a gastly parody of the work going on at the same time in England—work, some of it, weak enough in itself. During this period appear the names of a few French architects. At the beginning of the century their work did not differ essentially from that of the English architects who found their way hither or from the few educated Americans, for at this time Roman classicism (variously understood) reigned everywhere, and as long as it continued exercised a wholesome restraining influence. In the chaotic days of the forties, fifties, and sixties French names very rarely appear, and the only marked evidence of French influence was in the advent of the so-called French roofs, which appeared for the first time, we believe, in the Deacon House, in Boston, built about 1850, the work of a French architect named Le Moulner. The American builders of those days were sure to make ridiculous even their attempt to imitate good things; but this somewhat unreasonable contrivance, aided by the jig-saw, became in their hands the source of more ugliness than even America has otherwise seen.

Into this chaos gradually and in increasing numbers came, during the sixties and seventies the educated architects. They came from two main sources. On the one hand from England, or under more or less direct English influence, partly by the immigration of Englishmen trained in the ideals of the English Gothic revival, partly they were Americans who in English offices or through travel had received a similar training. The second source was France, and this influence was brought to us directly at this time by Mr. Richard M. Hunt, who, as we all know, received his education at the École des Beaux-Arts, and who, apart from his powerful personality, owed his great prestige in the profession mainly to his having been the first American architect who had received a systematic academic training for the art he professed. A number of architects, among them several who, as we all know, are still leaders in the profession, were trained in Mr. Hunt's atelier in New York or went to Paris to study for longer or shorter periods in the École. In 1867 the department of architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology was opened under the direction of Professor Ware, and the scheme of instruction was frankly based on that of the Paris school, adapted to meet the very different circumstances and requirements. In 1871 M. Eugène Létang came from Paris to take charge, under Mr. Ware,

of the work in design. Since then every important school of architecture that has been founded in America has sooner or later followed, more or less closely, the same model. Indeed it may be said to be all but universally acknowledged that the French system of instruction in architecture is the best in the world. Meanwhile an ever increasing number of Americans have been educated in the French school itself, some of them receiving there their whole training, others going to Paris after completing the course at one of the schools of architecture at home. Not a few have graduated from the École des Beaux-Arts, until now there are very few trained American architects who do not owe much, directly or indirectly, to that world-famous school.

When we consider the formless and chaotic condition in which American architecture for the most part found itself even twenty years ago, and the part which architects of French training have played in the striking improvements which have taken place since, it is perfectly obvious that America owes an enormous debt to France in this respect, a debt which was appropriately recognized a few years ago in the foundation at the École des Beaux-Arts of the Prix de Reconnaissance Americaine, a prize which is open only to Frenchmen. But this recognition does not by any means involve the conclusion that French influence has been an unmitigated blessing.

During the period in question great changes have taken place in France itself, changes of which it is essential we should take account in forming an opinion as to the value of French influence at this moment.

In spite of its fine qualities, almost unrivalled in the modern world, there has been constantly apparent in French architecture, since the time of Louis XIV, a note of extravagance, of theatrical display, of redundant, and sometimes tasteless, ornament, which has frequently injured some of its finest productions; but there have nearly always been men like Labrousse, Daumet, Vaudremer, who have, by precept and example, set their faces against this extravagance. But the wave of indiscriminate admiration of the vagaries and vulgarities of Rocco architecture, which has of late swept over the civilized world like a plague, has made itself felt nowhere more strongly than in Paris, and the mad craze for novelty for the sake of novelty has run riot in an extravagance of *hautes nouveautés* which is enough to make Labrousse and even André turn in their graves. This phase of *fin-de-siècle* decadence has made itself especially felt in the designs for the forthcoming Paris Exposition, which, magnificent as it is in conception and general composition, is producing structures almost delirious in their unreasonable and wanton ugliness. There are, of course, men still doing superb work, like Nènot, for instance, in his New Sorbonne, and the sound traditions of French training still make themselves felt amid all the extravagance and vulgar search for the merely novel—miscalled originality. But the main tone of French work at this moment, the main trend of taste at the École, has sadly changed since the ateliers of André and of Vaudremer, at opposite ends of the scale, were typical. This change, like every phase of human development, is expressive of the condition of the community that produced it. This decadence of taste, which must be evident (one would think) to every unprejudiced and competent observer, is of a piece with the social depravity which has produced the salacious French novel and the corruption that shows itself in Panama scandals and Dreyfus affairs. The want of sane, wholesome life, of high and pure and sweet ideals, which the best of Frenchmen themselves openly deplore, has its inevitable effect on taste in the fine-arts. The jaded and sated palate calls for some new sensation, and the result is all the more deplorable because of evident ability and training prostituted.

Let us now briefly consider some of the fine qualities which have been, and still to some extent are, apparent in French architecture, and then let us look somewhat more narrowly at the present French ideals and see whither they are tending.

The training of the École des Beaux-Arts, shaken, though it had been, by the Neo-Grec movement of the middle of the century, and, in spite of extravagance, which already showed itself, was still, even twenty years ago, synonymous with the somewhat rigid traditional Classicism which had been so powerfully inveighed against by Viollet-le-Duc. Cold and unsympathetic as it sometimes was, it had, at any rate, this advantage: that it tended to curb the growing tendency to license, and that it was a safe medium for instruction in the fundamental principles of architecture. New forms and modifications were looked at somewhat askance and were only gradually admitted, as it were, to recognized standing. It was somewhat unyielding and its notion of correctness of style was still mainly a matter of tradition. But what then, as now, constituted the strength of French training and practice was its insistence on composition, its excellence of proportion and mass, and, above all, its splendid mastery of monumental planning. It taught careful consideration of fenestration, the study of light and shade, the effective placing of ornament, and showed that rhythmic proportion has relation to all these. It insisted that a building must tell its story; that it must be expressive of its purpose, and that the exterior must be expressive of the interior arrangement, of the plan, which is the key to the whole composition. Interior and exterior, plan and elevation, must work together to produce one organic and rhythmically connected whole. In insisting upon these things, it was teaching that architectural design depends, not upon caprice, but upon principle, and it gave, up to a certain point, some understanding of what these principles are. In doing all this it inculcated, though perhaps not always

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clearly, the fundamental laws upon which good architecture, upon which fine-art of every description, has always depended and always will depend. And it taught and still teaches, what, perhaps after all, is for the impatient American the most important lesson, that good results in the fine-arts are only to be attained, in the first place, by long and patient and severe training; and, in the next, by equally patient and painstaking study and restudy of each problem as it arises. On the other hand, the principles taught seemed to stop at the ornament, as if the smallest part of any work of art could be subject to any other laws than those that must govern the whole, or as if one part must be a matter of principle while another could be a matter of mere tradition or of caprice. The ornament—most of the detail, in fact—though often carefully studied and always delicately executed, was apt to be either meaningless and extravagant or coldly traditional in its form.

Moreover, the training of the École, while thorough along its chosen lines, was narrow, so that those brought up exclusively under its influence were generally strangely ignorant of all forms of architecture except those which were traditional within the school. They had made no adequate study of the historic styles and so had no understanding or appreciation of the way in which the immutable principles of design expressed themselves in other forms and under other conditions. Their experience was so narrow that the laws of design could not be thoroughly appreciated as the result of principle, and these laws thus became, in their hands, little more than a set of academic formulæ. The designs produced and the judgment formed were alike too apt to be the mere conventional result of conventional rules the reasons for which were but dimly apprehended.

The inevitable revolt against this rigidity grew apace, and the reaction under existing conditions in France has led to that license of design which we have already characterized, and which has gone so far that the use of any traditional form seems now to be regarded in some quarters as a sign of slavish devotion to precedent, an indication of want of thought, an evidence of complete lack of originality. The fundamental laws of composition are still taught as before; but originality, so called, mere capricious novelty, has become the standard rather than beauty and reasonableness. The changes brought about have not been the result of organic growth and development, but have been produced (to use the apt phrase of Professor Hamlin in his history of architecture) by "the striving for originality and the effort to discard traditional forms." Its ideals are no longer those of purity and expressiveness of architectural form, but of novelty. Expressiveness of a kind is indeed aimed at, but it takes the unimaginative form of, for instance, ornamenting the exterior of an army and navy building with cannon-balls, gun cartridges and conning towers, put on without the slightest regard to the architectural purpose of the parts to which they are applied.

If there is one thing that the American public has needed for the improvement of its taste in art, it is to be taught that there is something better than novelty and change; that what is beautiful and reasonable is the ideal to be aimed at, not to be "up-to-date" or "in fashion." It needs to be taught that the finest things in art are usually the simplest,—those things which at first sight seem easiest, most obvious, most natural—not those things which by their overloaded ornament, their *bizarrerie*, their theatrical posturing cry out for attention. We need to appreciate that those qualities which make fine manners also make fine art—restraint, repose, naturalness, graciousness.

We have been learning these things; but are not helped forward by indiscriminate admiration of this latest and least admirable phase of French art.

It is curious that those who are loudest in its praise are those who least of all show signs of putting one of the chief precepts of its doctrine into practice in this country. This doctrine teaches, and rightly teaches, that a country can have a vital art only in so far as it solves its own problems in its own way, expressing freely its own ideals in meeting its own wants. The art of France is held up to admiration as being such a vital art. This is to a degree true, and that art expresses French ideals, French taste—and also French depravity. Now we do not take a single step toward producing an art of our own by a direct importation in all its details of the forms of French architecture, which have nothing whatever to do with the principles taught in the French school, but are the mere accidents of environment. On the contrary, whatever beginnings of vital work are found in our midst are strangled by such direct imitation, and it is worth noting that the most successful and characteristic developments of American architecture, the commercial building and the country-house, do not depend in the least on direct French precedent. Indeed, the country-house is a problem which modern French architecture seems incapable of solving in an interesting way. But it is argued that we must make a beginning somewhere and that the best we can do is to take the best style of modern times as a point of departure. The French style meets our wants most nearly, it is argued, because it is the most modern. This is a manifest *non-sequitur*. Moreover, as we have noted, we had made beginnings to which this direct French importation comes as an interruption, which, if successful, would make us architecturally a mere province of France. Town-halls which look like French *mairies* are manifestly un-American and are felt to be exotic, out of place. Buildings which precisely recall the Parisian boulevards are obvious indications of lack of ideas and lack of vitality in our own art, and this would be true were French art far finer than it is.

The road to reasonable independent development does not lie this way. The love of extravagance and the desire for mere novelty on the one hand, and the close and unreasoning imitation and copying of the work of others, ancient or modern, on the other are the Scylla and Charybdis of American art. It seems to me that the recent French propagandism contains both dangers.

What we need is to understand more and more fully those fundamental principles of our art which underlie the best work of all times and all styles: to understand and know thoroughly the architectural forms of the past and appreciate how in them these principles were expressed: to use these forms in our own work freely, varying from them not capriciously, but according to principle, as changed conditions, changed modes of construction, changed ideals seem to require. Working in this way, the modifications which come will not be forced, but natural, and will have that quality of inevitableness which is inseparable from vital work and is one of its greatest charms.

We have learned much from France, and yet have much to learn; but let us not take from her indiscriminately.

In so far as the French influence helps us to sound methods of education; in so far as it teaches us composition, monumental planning, the importance of balance and proportion in plan and mass; as it leads us to regard our buildings as organic unities, and to make exterior and interior hold together as rhythmical component parts of one whole; as it leads to careful consideration of fenestration, of light and shade, of scale relations; as it discourages hasty and slipshod and ill-studied work; in so far, in short, as it helps us to principles and to devoted and painstaking study, its influence has been, and will be, helpful and wholesome.

But in so far as it leads us to mere copyism of the externals of recent French buildings; in so far as it leads us to seek novelty in place of excellence; in so far as it encourages a taste for extravagant and overloaded ornamentation, and tends to destroy delight in simple and quiet work,—in so far as it does these things, the French influence is deeply to be deplored.

But I have little fear for the result. We have in this country made great strides, and, I believe, shall continue to progress. The pendulum swings back and forth, but the fingers move onward. The evil that we have suffered (and it seems to me we have suffered from an overadmiration of a style that has grave defects as well as great qualities) will, I venture to think, prove temporary, while the gain will be permanent. The French copyism is a mere passing fad. The principles that have been learned we may hope to keep.

Those who have been educated exclusively under French influences and have imbibed French ideals so completely that they have failed to see clearly the limitations of French work, will inevitably in time be influenced by their environment and by the work of those of other training. Already we may discern signs that this is the case. Both sides will gain from both, and the resultant will be different from anything we can now foresee.

By way of conclusion, and speaking now merely of the training in the French School, these two considerations may be suggested: That, since discrimination needs to be exercised with regard to French work, it is best that impressionable students should not come under its direct and exclusive influence until they have had such training as may enable them to discriminate, until they have been taught to think and reason for themselves with regard to their art, and that the schools we now have in this country afford ample opportunity for such training; and, secondly, that if we are to have an architecture in any true sense national, if we are to be architecturally anything more than a mere province of France, we must shortly cease to be dependent to the extent we now are on the French School.

REPORT OF THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS.

THE Board of Directors elected at the Convention held in Washington, D. C., November 1, 2 and 3, 1898, held their first meeting at the Octagon, January 5, 1899. The Executive and Judiciary Committees were elected by the Board of Directors and the President appointed the Standing Committees for the year 1899, as published in the last *Proceedings*.

Forty-four new members have been elected during the year and twenty applications are now pending.

Two Fellows of the American Institute of Architects have died since the last Convention. Mr. William Crawford Smith, born November 26, 1837. He served with distinction in the Confederate Army. After the Civil War he resumed the practice of architecture in Nashville, where he took a high standing professionally, socially and as a man. He was prominently connected with the Nashville Exposition, designing the reproduction of the Parthenon. Mr. Smith joined the Institution in 1881. He was elected a member of the Board of Directors of the Institute in 1892-1896, and again in 1898. In 1895 he was elected Second Vice-President.

He had endeared himself to the profession with whom he came in contact, by his courtesy, high sense of honor and genial manners.

At the breaking-out of the Spanish-American War, he was made Colonel of Volunteers in a Tennessee Regiment, and was on his way to Manila at the time of his last election as a Director of the Institute. He died from an attack of apoplexy while at the head of his command on the firing line, February 5, 1899.

Mr. John R. Church, of Rochester, N. Y., who joined the Institute